

Rhodora

JOURNAL OF THE
NEW ENGLAND BOTANICAL CLUB

Vol. 92

July 1990

No. 871

RHODORA, Vol. 92, No. 871, pp. 113–119, 1990

A DREAM OF THE WOODS
A RECENTLY DISCOVERED PIECE OF
EARLY FERNALDIANA

LESLIE J. MEHRHOFF

ABSTRACT

A Dream of the Woods is a poem thought to be attributable to Merritt Lyndon Fernald. This poem was recently discovered in the University of Maine Archives. A bibliographic search, queries to students of Fernald, and writing samples were employed to verify the poem's authenticity. A possible scenario of why the poem might have been written and why it went undiscovered is offered.

Key Words: Fernald, Fernaldiana, poem, *A Dream of the Woods*, Maine

Our views of early botanists are generally biased by the biographers' views of their subject's later years. Rarely are we afforded tangential views of our predecessors in their earlier years; if these early vignettes exist, they usually come from notebooks, journals, or correspondence.

In 1985, while preparing a talk for the Connecticut Botanical Society on Merritt Lyndon Fernald, I visited the University of Maine's library to consult their archives. My intention was to find a picture of Fernald's father, Merritt Caldwell Fernald, who was the first president of the State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now the University of Maine) at Orono (Rollins, 1951). The special collections librarian helped locate memorabilia of the elder Fernald. At one point she asked if I wished to see specimens, as stated on the accession card, collected by Merritt Lyndon Fernald. I was brought a package of heavy paper folded into a packet and tied with a coarse, flat string similar to a shoelace. On the outside was penned in elaborately hand-written script

A Dream of the Woods. Upon opening the packet, we found 22 herbarium sheets, 17 with pressed plant specimens attached. The sheets either had a combination of specimen(s) and verse at the bottom of the sheet or just verse centered on the sheet. There were no collection data on the sheets with specimens. The poem was unsigned.

In the following poem the name which appears in parentheses at the beginning of a verse is the species of plant attached to that page.

A Dream of the Woods

Merritt Lyndon Fernald

1. As seated in my city study drear,
I linger o'er my volumes, lost in dreams,
Sweet recollection now to me appear.
And I again am following woodland streams.
2. [*Osmunda claytoniana* L.]
Osmundas stout lift up their tropic fronds,
3. [*Arisaema triphyllum* (L.) Schott]
The Indian Turnip in the peat abounds,
4. [*Tiarella cordifolia* L.]
The Bishop's Cap holds out its fairy wands,
While trees above are filled with heavenly sounds.
5. White-throated Sparrow, Northern Nightingale,
With marked precision chants his matin hymn.
The Hermit Thrush, half hidden in yon vale
His wondrous flute now pipes from limb to limb;
His song expanding with the dawning day.
In silvery ripples from his breast doth flow,
And as we pause to listen by the way,
Our sluggish hearts with wakening hopes do glow.
6. [*Trillium undulatum* Willd., *Trillium erectum* L., *Trillium cernuum* L.]
Wake-robins, white, and pink-and-white, and red,
'Neath pine-trees stand, in saplings tender shade;
The painted smiles, the red throws back his head,

The white, more shy, 'neath leaves her cheek has laid;
 And as we softly o'er the morass tread,
 We move with care, knowing she is afraid.

7. [*Rhododendron canadense* (L.) Torr.]

The gay Rhodora 'long the margin stands,
 Forerunner of the Summer's fairer Rose;
 Yet coming as does to ope Spring's bands,
 She brightens every wood wherein she blows.

8. [*Caltha palustris* L.]

Marsh-marigold expands her golden globe,
 By fairer flowers not at all made shy;
 Her brighter hue with splendor doth enrobe
 These shadowy spots, by trees shut from the sky.

9. [*Polystichum acrostichoides* (Michx.) Schott]

The Christmas-Fern new fronds has now unrolled,
 Far tenderer than the leaves of last year's
 These soon will cheer the forest elsewhere cold,
 When neighbors die too weak to stand the strain:

10. [*Dryopteris intermedia* (Willd.) Gray]

But one besides her stands by every wrought
 To thrive. The Wood Ferns o'er the ripples fling
 Fair fronds, by many of fairer maiden sought;
 Resisting cold for months, they fade ere Spring.

11. The Winter Wren, coy minstrel dressed in brown,
 From Hemlock twig now flits to that of Spruce,
 From Spruce to Fir, where now he settles down;
 His effervescing song most wild and loose,
 His rhythmic cadence, and his sweet sad notes,
 His fluent strain, that rich metallic sound,
 While sylvan plaintiveness through each strain floats,
 Within our hearts responsive throbs have found.

12. [*Equisetum sylvaticum* L.,

Equisetum arvense L., (2 specimens)]

The Horsetail, striate stemmed, with curious joints,
 Has, quick as Cadmus' army pierced the ground;
 Each fairy branch in new direction points,
 As guiding men to secrets yet unbound.

13. [*Trientalis borealis* Raf.]
The Trientalis, Chickweed Wintergreen,
From yonder mossy knoll reflects the sky.
14. [*Polygala paucifolia* Willd.]
Gay Fringed Polygalas those stars have seen,
So stretching out their wings attempt to fly.
15. The Flicker on yon Aspen old and dry
Now boisterous laughs and chuckles full of life,
Now whets his beak on knotty branch close by,
And pausing waits the coming of his wife;
He wisely tries the surface half decayed
And finding spot of firmer texture there,
Upon it now his whetted beak is laid;
Resounding drum-beats fill the enchanted air;
Again he laughs and once more beats his drum
Then utters still another louder shout,
Still wondering that his spouse is not yet come;
At last it seems his patience can't hold out,
With sudden dive he plunges into flight
Exposing golden pinions decked with red.
We stand enraptured by this gorgeous sight
Scarce conscious that our Sorcerer has fled.
16. [*Eriophorum spissum* Fern.]
The Hare's-tail spreads the bog with ermine fleece,
17. [*Coptis groenlandica* (Oeder) Fern.]
The Gold-thread's metal fibres pierce the loam,
Her glossy leaves above robe every crease,
18. [*Viburnum cassinoides* L.]
While Withe-rod heaps the margin high with foam.
19. [*Andromeda glaucophylla* Link, *Chamaedaphne calyculata*
(L.) Moench, *Ledum groenlandicum* Oeder]
Andromeda, Cassandra, and Wild Tea
Aristocratic circles here have made;
20. [*Kalmia polifolia* Wang.]
Pale Laurel, scarce so noble as these three,
With tottering step has lingered in their shade.

21. [*Arethusa bulbosa* L. (6 specimens)]
Shy *Arethusa* becks me cross the stream,
And as I near approach my Grecian maid,
A book dropped to the floor disturbs my dream,
And thoughts of Nymphs and Naiads quickly fade.
22. As when one wanders thoughtful through the wood,
New inspirations come from every sod,*
So after this 'tis easier to be good;
My heart o'erflows, for I have been with God.

DISCUSSION

The obvious question is whether or not this poem was actually written by Merritt Lyndon Fernald. I suspect the following scenario.

Young Fernald came from Orono to Cambridge in 1891 at the age of 18 (Merrill, 1954). There is no evidence in his early correspondence with Sereno Watson (now at the Gray Herbarium Library Archives) that he had ever lived away from home before enrolling in the Lawrence Scientific School of Harvard University. The same correspondence shows that he was very fond of the out-of-doors and that he had already spent many hours afield botanizing. It is easy to imagine Fernald being homesick for both his family and his beloved Maine woods and bogs.

I suspect that he wrote this poem and either brought it to his family home while on holiday or mailed it to his family. His father kept the packet of specimens with his personal things and when these came to the University Archives, this "collection" came along with them.

In an attempt to ascertain whether or not Fernald wrote this poem, I first checked the bibliography of Fernald's writings prepared by Elmer Drew Merrill and published in the *Biographical Memoirs of the National Academy of Science* (Merrill, 1954). This collection is a compendium of Fernald's published writings. If, as I suspect, this poem has gone unnoticed, it is not surprising that *A Dream of the Woods* does not appear in this bibliography.

* The only word that is unclear in the entire poem occurs on page 22, line 2. The first letter cannot be distinguished. The word is either rod or sod. Unfortunately, either word could fit the tenor of the poem and neither gives clearer meaning to the verse.

I next spoke with some of Fernald's former students who might have heard him speak about his early experiences. Most notable amongst these was Dr. Bernice Schubert of Harvard University who was close to Professor Fernald in his later years. None of those queried knew of anything like *A Dream of the Woods*.

Finally, I checked the handwriting of the poem against herbarium specimens that had handwritten labels prepared by Fernald. I chose specimens from the New England Botanical Club Herbarium (*Carex oronensis*, *Carex chordorrhiza*, and *Pedicularis furbishiae*) that had been collected by Fernald around the same time as I suspected that the poem might have been written. Letters, both upper and lower case, from the labels written by Fernald clearly matched those of the poem.

Botanists frequently hold the image of Fernald as a stolid fieldworker, a sharply tongued critic, and a man obsessed with advancing our knowledge of the northeastern North American flora with little time for anything else. The mention of birds in the writings of Fernald seems out of place. In the last verse, the line "... for I have been with God" seems paradoxical to our image of the calculating scientist, as many people view Fernald. I suspect that this is supposition on the part of those that view him in this light.

First we must remember that Fernald's biographers have not delved deeply into his personal life. Second, Fernald was not an evolutionary biologist in current sense, so the mention of God, especially in his early writings, is not incongruous. Lastly, there are occasional glimpses in the literature of a Fernald who shows great interest in the more personal aspects of his student's lives, especially their children [cf. Raup letter, 1985, Hodge and Howard comments, (Proceedings NEBC 800th Meeting, 1986)]. Dr. Eugene Ogden once told me that to get Fernald to change the subject from an unpleasant topic, he only had to ask Fernald how his children were.

The key to a side of Fernald that doesn't usually come out, a sentimental side, comes from an anecdote related by Arthur Stanley Pease in his biographic sketch of Fernald (Pease, 1951). Pease recounts how when, "as a thoughtless youth, he remarked that a certain investigation, even if carefully pursued, could only have sentimental value." Fernald responded by saying, with a good deal of feeling, "This world would be a pretty poor place if there were no sentiment in it" (Pease, 1951).

I suggest that this poem seems to be an expression of sentiment by a youth who loved the wilds of his native state and who, by taking a job in the city, missed them very much. This same sentimental youth grew to be one of the most knowledgeable students of the vascular flora of eastern North America, a highly respected phytogeographer, and a gifted teacher. All this accomplishment was in no small part due to his appreciation for nature and his first-hand acquaintance with plants as the basis for detailed botanical knowledge. *A Dream of the Woods* should be added to the list of Fernaldiana as an example of Fernald's strong bond to nature.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the staff of the Special Collections Department, Raymond H. Fogler Library, University of Maine, Orono, for bringing these "collections" to my attention. Sally Rooney, of the Botany Department at the University of Maine, helped immensely by checking my typed transcription against the original poem. Lynn Aspland, Carol Paluch, and Diane Tyler have typed drafts of this manuscript. I checked with Drs. W. Drury, E. Ogden, G. Rossbach, B. Schubert, and R. Tryon to see if they had heard Fernald mention this work. To them, I am especially grateful for their time and for the reminiscences of their professor they shared with me. T. Mehrhoff, T. Philbrick, S. Rooney, and B. Schubert made helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- MERRILL, E. D. 1954. Merritt Lyndon Fernald 1873–1950 (including bibliography). *Biogr. Mem. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 28: 45–90 + photograph.
PEASE, A. S. 1951. Merritt Lyndon Fernald 1873–1950. *Rhodora* 53: 33–39 + photograph.
Proceedings of the NEBC 800th Meeting. 1986. *Rhodora* 88: 157–228.
ROLLINS, R. C. 1951. Merritt Lyndon Fernald 1873–1950. *Bull. Torr. Bot. Club* 78: 270–272 + photograph.

CONNECTICUT GEOLOGICAL AND
NATURAL HISTORY SURVEY
BOX U-42
THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT
STORRS, CT 06268 USA